

Research to Application: Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose

Introduction

As the nation's #1 provider of fatherhood skill-building programs and resources, NFI provides guidance for practitioners and organizations on how they might be able to use the latest research on human behavior to enhance the effectiveness of their work with fathers. NFI provides this guidance in a series of blog posts called *Research to Application: Guidance for Practitioners and Programs*. The series is also available in the form of quick reference guides that you can download by clicking on the button at the end of the posts.

The series offers a platform for generating dialogue among NFI, organizations, and practitioners on ways that research can be applied to addressing pain points in serving fathers. This post is the second one in the series. (To access the first post, click [here](#).) It provides ideas on how you might integrate research on **autonomy, mastery, and purpose** into your work with fathers. Integrating this research could help you **better motivate fathers** to be the best dads they can be. It could also help you motivate fathers to enroll in and habitually attend your fatherhood program because helping fathers achieve autonomy, mastery, and purpose will add value to your program from fathers' perspective.

If you implement any of the ideas in this post, or develop and implement your own ideas, please share them with us at info@fatherhood.org. We'll use your experiences to update this guide so it is even more useful.

The Research

Daniel Pink in *Drive*¹ captures the research on what motivates humans. He provides insight into the three elements that are crucial to motivating people to take action regardless of the situation. When people feel they have **autonomy, mastery, and purpose** in their lives generally or around a specific situation (e.g. making decisions about how to parent their children, decisions regarding their jobs, etc.), they are more likely to be motivated, or driven. They are also more likely to feel a sense of well-being.

- **Autonomy** means that a person has the freedom to make his or her own decisions. Autonomous people have control over their decisions. Pink points out that being autonomous isn't synonymous with independence because a person can be autonomous in an interdependent situation, such as parenting in which a father and mother depend on each other to raise their child. **Autonomy is critical for engagement.**
- **Mastery** means that a person has command over something, such as knowledge about how to be an effective parent and skill in how to care for a child's needs. To attain mastery, a person must desire to become better and better at something **that matters**, such as how to be a better father and husband/partner. The engagement that comes from autonomy is

¹ Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead Books.

critical to a person's desire to master something. For someone to master something, they must understand three things: 1) it is possible to become better at something, 2) it is hard work (a pain) to become better at something, and 3) it is never possible to attain complete mastery, only to get closer to it over time.

- **Purpose** means that a person has a reason for doing something and involves determination, as in a person being driven to be a better parent by a greater objective than just being a better parent. Intrinsic motivation (i.e. driven by something inside of them) is crucial to sustained purpose. If someone is only extrinsically motivated (i.e. driven by something outside of them), purpose won't stand the test of time. Motivation will be fleeting at best.

These three elements are like the legs of a three-legged stool. They work together to support the base of the stool (e.g. the skill someone seeks to obtain), but it is purpose that is the most vital of the three elements. While people who have a high level of autonomy and mastery at something can be very effective at that something, people who have both of those elements **and a clear purpose behind what they're doing** are even more effective.

Ideas on Application

This three-element framework is a good one for assessing how well your current fatherhood program motivates fathers. If you don't yet have a program, it offers a good framework for developing one that will leverage fathers' motivators.

A well-designed fatherhood program can give fathers a sense of autonomy and help fathers build toward mastery in fathering knowledge and skills. Regarding autonomy, a program must help them move toward greater engagement in the lives of their children. Here's how.

- It should be balanced from a prescriptive and non-prescriptive perspective. It should balance research-based, prescriptive content (e.g. tips) on what makes for effective parenting regardless of fathers' individual circumstances (e.g. knowledge of child development and how to apply effective discipline techniques) with general guidance that allows fathers to choose how to be good fathers given their individual circumstances (e.g. how to be involved in their children's lives if they have regular versus limited or no access to their children). If you've ever watched the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, think about how Captain Barbossa (the villain) defines the third rule of the pirate's code known as *parley* when he captures the beautiful heroine: "The code is more what you'd call 'guidelines' than actual rules. Welcome aboard the Black Pearl, Miss Turner."
- It should include wrap-around services necessary for some fathers to overcome challenges that present barriers to a sense of autonomy (i.e. the sense that they have as much control as possible over their fatherhood-related decisions). These are services provided by your organization or partner organizations that address the pressing needs that fathers might have that aren't directly related to parenting and fathering knowledge or skills, such as the need for a job, a high school diploma or GED, visitation rights, or affordable child support. Because fathers' needs can be a moving target, it's essential to assess their needs before,

during, and after they participate in a fatherhood program so that your program always has a beat on the pulse of fathers' most pressing needs.

Regarding mastery, a program should:

- Be research-based in its content. Simply put, it should include content on what works that is based on research and evidence. (Such programs are alternatively called research- or evidence-informed.) The facilitator of the program (whether delivered in a group-based or one-on-one setting) must be clear with fathers that: 1) it is possible to become better at being a father regardless of circumstance, 2) it is hard work (a pain) to become a better father, and 3) it is never possible to attain complete mastery in parenting and fathering, only to get closer to them over time.
- Include opportunities for fathers to apply, or at least reflect upon, what they learn. Research shows that parent-education programs with application components are extremely effective. Ideally, fathers would go home after learning a new discipline skill, for example, and try it when their children need to be disciplined and then have the opportunity to share that experience and receive constructive feedback. Unfortunately, that's not possible for some fathers (e.g. non-custodial) to apply some of what they learn often or at all. Programs should include tools that allow for customized application of what fathers learn, such as action steps fathers can take between sessions, or a close approximation, such as role-plays and time for reflection on how they might or would apply what they learn.
- Include an alumni component that allows fathers who "graduate" from a program to continue to build toward mastery around parenting, fathering, and related issues (e.g. relationships). Fathers become hungry for more as their sense of autonomy and mastery develops. The organizations that use NFI's programs have found that fathers often want to re-enroll in a program they have already completed to continue, in large part, their learning. By offering additional programs or workshops of any length in a sequence, your organization can help fathers continue to build toward mastery.

Purpose is a bit trickier. As Pink points out, building autonomy and toward mastery will increase the chances that someone will become more motivated. Certainly a good fatherhood program that addresses the first two legs of the stool will get you two-thirds of the way there. Organizations that run NFI's programs have found that just by participating in a fatherhood program, fathers develop a greater sense of purpose in being a great dad. We find that the energy and enthusiasm facilitators bring can help fathers find their purpose. Unfortunately, only fathers can find and unlock the intrinsic motivation associated with a greater purpose in being a great dad.

This is where you must get creative. You must first determine whether fathers are extrinsically or intrinsically motivated to participate in your program. Doing so will help you identify the fathers who, because they're intrinsically motivated, are more likely to engage with the program and consistently attend and those whose extrinsic motivation, while necessary to get them to attend initially, will make it more difficult for them to engage with the program and more likely to participate infrequently or drop out. You'll have to spend more time with the latter group to help them find their purpose.

The best time to identify fathers' motivators is before you start to work with them one-on-one or in a group. Regardless of setting, you could schedule one-on-one time with each father before you start your work with him. If you will work with fathers in a group, you could bring the entire group in for an "introductory session" before the first session. Either way, use the following two-step approach to identify fathers' motivators.

- **Step 1:** Ask fathers either or both of the following questions. What is the main reason you're in this program? When it comes to being involved in your child's (children's) life, what keeps you up at night?"
- **Step 2:** Use the "5 Whys" line of questioning to go even deeper and help fathers uncover their truest (or deepest) motivators. It works like this. Ask the fathers either of the questions above. After they provide their answers, and regardless of the content of their answers, simply ask "Why?" or "Why is that?" Don't say anything else. Don't pass judgment on their answers. After the fathers' second answers, again ask "Why?" or "Why is that?" Continue this line of questioning until you've questioned their answers five times. By the fifth time, you should have identified fathers' truest motivators. It's like peeling back the skin of an onion. Using the 5 Whys can seem awkward at first, but keep at it.

The beauty of this approach is that it can help fathers unlock the motivators they didn't even know they had. Fathers whose initial responses might indicate extrinsic sources of motivation might instead (or in addition) have intrinsic sources. Write down their answers so you remember them and so that you can identify the fathers with whom you might need to work more diligently to engage with the program and consistently attend. When fathers encounter obstacles to being involved with their children or attending the program, or are just having a bad day, use what you learn to remind fathers why they're going through the program. You can also use this approach as the program progresses (e.g. halfway through and at the end of the program) to see whether fathers' motivators change.

Regardless of how you apply autonomy, mastery, and purpose, approach your effort as an experiment. Keep track of what works with fathers in general and with specific kinds of fathers (e.g. custodial and non-custodial) so that you can apply what works in future work with fathers one-on-one or in groups, and avoid what doesn't work. And last but not least, **share your results with NFI at info@fatherhood.org** so that we can improve future versions of this guide.

Resources

As you apply the autonomy, mastery, and purpose framework to increase fathers' motivation, consider reading *Drive* and the following book: *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol Dweck. This book focuses on the research that shows people can develop and grow throughout their lives, and that nothing is set in stone. It can further inform you about mastery, in particular.

Don't forget to look for more posts and reference guides in this series!